

Peter Magowan, Giants Fan Turned Giants' Owner, Is Dead at 76

Peter Magowan, the controlling owner of the San Francisco Giants, at the team's stadium in 2008, the year he retired. His purchase of the team in 1992 kept it from moving to Florida. Robert Galbraith/Reuters

By **Richard Sandomir**

Jan. 28, 2019



Peter Magowan, who in 1992 — decades after he had watched the New York Giants play at the Polo Grounds as a boy — led a group that bought the team to keep it from relocating to Florida from San Francisco, died on Sunday at his home in San Francisco. He was 76.

His wife, Deborah, confirmed his death. Mr. Magowan had liver and prostate cancer and had had a liver transplant.

Mr. Magowan had been the chief executive of Safeway Stores, the nation's largest supermarket chain, when Bob Lurie, the Giants' owner, made a deal with investors in the St. Petersburg-Tampa area in August 1992 to move the team there. Very quickly, a group of local investors, led by Mr. Magowan, assembled a \$100 million bid to keep the team in San Francisco, where the Giants had moved from New York 35 years earlier.

To Mr. Magowan, the possibility of the team fleeing his adopted hometown was as unfathomable as the departure of the Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, who moved to Los Angeles, had been.

"I don't think Brooklyn has recovered to this day," Mr. Magowan [told The San Francisco Chronicle in 2000](#).

When National League owners voted, 9-4, to reject the Giants' move, Mr. Magowan's group was free to acquire them.

Under Mr. Magowan, who was the team's managing general partner for nearly 16 years, the Giants' image was recast. In late 1992 he signed the superstar slugger Barry Bonds to a six-year, \$43.75 million contract, then the richest in baseball history. He brought back Willie Mays, the franchise's incandescent superstar, in a lifetime role — he had not had a formal position with the team since before he retired in 1973 — and other former players returned in various capacities.

Mr. Magowan's most significant achievement was building Pacific Bell Park ([now called Oracle Park](#)), a waterfront stadium that replaced windy, decrepit Candlestick Park, the team's home since 1960. Most owners of sports teams demand public money to finance their stadiums and arenas; in contrast, Mr. Magowan used private funds after local voters had rejected four referendums that would have given public funding to the team's previous owner, Mr. Lurie.

Mr. Magowan in 1983. He became Safeway's chairman and chief executive at 37.
Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

"We needed to do it in San Francisco," he told The Chronicle in 2003. "The public had spoken four times that they did not want a publicly financed stadium."

Pacific Bell Park, which opened in 2000, has quirky dimensions and unusual features like McCovey Cove, a body of water beyond the right-field wall where boaters race to retrieve home run balls. It is named for [Willie McCovey](#), the Giants' longtime Hall of Fame first baseman, who died last year.

The stadium has become a baseball mecca: Attendance peaked at 3.39 million in 2011 and has fallen below three million only twice in 19 seasons. The management team Mr. Magowan oversaw before retiring in 2008 as managing general partner helped produce World Series championships in 2010, 2012 and 2014.

"He had a wonderful approach to business and life: He'd say, 'Let's make 100 decisions a week and get 87 of them right,' " Laurence Baer, the team's president and chief executive, said in a telephone interview on Monday. "Everything he did — saving the team from moving, the ballpark, signing Bonds — was about taking risks."

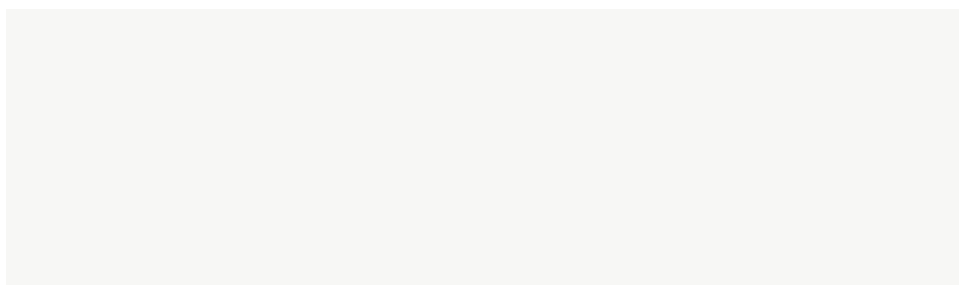
Peter Alden Magowan was born on April 5, 1942, in Manhattan. His mother, Doris (Merrill) Magowan, was a daughter of Charles Merrill, a founder of the Merrill Lynch brokerage firm. His father, Robert, worked at Merrill Lynch before he joined Safeway Stores in the early 1950s and took over as chairman in 1955. Mr. Merrill had been a large investor in Safeway and recommended that Robert Magowan become the chain's chief executive.

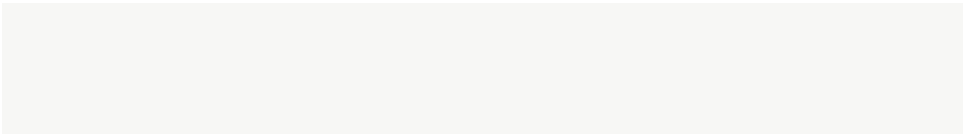
Peter was listening to the radio at school on Oct. 3, 1951, when the Giants third baseman Bobby Thomson [hit the ninth-inning home run](#) in a playoff game against the Dodgers that propelled the Giants to the World Series.

When he got home, his father had a better story to tell about Thomson's home run, which came to be known as "the Shot Heard Round the World."

"Guess where I've been today?" Robert Magowan said, according to an account given by [Peter Magowan to The Daily News](#) in 1993.

The elder Magowan had been to the game with three businessmen, who left before the ninth inning had started.





Mr. Magowan congratulating Barry Bonds in August 2007 after Bonds hit his 756th career home run, breaking Hank Aaron's Major League Baseball record. One of Mr. Magowan's first acts as the Giants' owner was to sign Bonds to what was then the richest contract in baseball history. Kimberly White/Reuters

"Let that be a lesson to you," he recalled his father telling him. "Don't ever give up."

Peter's path to Safeway was indirect. He earned a bachelor's degree in American literature at Stanford University and a master's in politics, philosophy and economics at Oxford University in England before finishing two years of undergraduate work at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Baltimore. But his education, and two summers at the State Department, did not provide the direction he wanted.

So he went to work for Safeway, where he was a checker, shelf stocker and produce clerk before being given greater responsibility as a store manager, district manager, retail operations manager and regional vice president. At 37, he became Safeway's chairman and chief executive.

In an incident that became central to Mr. Magowan's tenure at Safeway, he fended off a hostile takeover bid in 1986 from the Dart Group Corporation by agreeing to a \$4.25 billion leveraged buyout from Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Company. The buyout left Safeway's management in place but saddled the company with enormous debt; it eventually [eliminated 63,000 jobs](#).

"It was tough on all the workers, including me," [he told The Chronicle in 2003](#). "We went through a lot of stress."

Mr. Magowan is survived by his wife, Deborah (Johnston) Magowan; his daughters, Kimberley Wagner, Margot Garvin, Hilary Malko and Kristen Butt; a son, Matthew Cook; 13 grandchildren; and his brothers, Robin, Merrill and Mark. His first marriage, to Jill Tarlau, ended in divorce.

While Mr. Magowan described the acquisition of Barry Bonds, who broke Major League Baseball's career home run record as a Giant, as his best business decision, suspicions that Bonds used steroids have shadowed him and the team for years. When questioned by George J. Mitchell, the former United States senator who was investigating the use of performance-enhancing drugs for Major League Baseball, Mr. Magowan said Bonds had told him he had taken substances that he later learned were illegal.

But two days later, a lawyer for Mr. Magowan told Mr. Mitchell that he had misspoken and could recall only that Bonds had said he had not knowingly taken steroids.

Mr. Magowan elaborated in 2016, telling [The Chronicle](#): "I didn't see what I was supposed to see, and I'm sorry for that. People say, 'Why didn't you know Barry was taking steroids?' I say, 'I don't know. I still don't know.' What am I supposed to do, go in his locker and see if there's a steroid bottle?"

Like most wealthy businessmen who buy sports teams, Mr. Magowan became known more for his ownership of the Giants than for his management of Safeway. His success in turning the Giants into a model franchise earned him induction into the Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame in 2016. Just last week, the Giants announced that he would be honored on Feb. 9 with a bronze plaque on the team's Wall of Fame.

A version of this article appears in print on, on Page B12 of the New York edition with the headline: Peter Magowan, Who Fought to Keep Giants in San Francisco, Is Dead at 76. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe



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